

Progress Report

MONTANA FORESTS IN FOCUS

State Engagement in Federal Land Management



Figure 1: The left photo shows overstocked conditions on national forest lands in the Wildland Urban Interface in Sanders County within the Little Eddy Farm Bill Project boundary. The right photo shows conditions on treated private land adjacent to the Little Eddy project. This project on the Lolo NF is receiving state funding to improve stand resiliency which will have cross boundary benefits.

In the past decade, mountain pine beetle has affected more than six million acres of Montana forests and the wildfire season has increased in both length and severity. In order to provide Montanans with all the benefits derived from our state's forested landscape, it is important to work across ownerships to stem the insect and disease and create healthier forests that are more resilient to wildfire.

Federal lands in Montana make up over half of our state's forested landscape. What happens on these lands impacts all landowners. It is therefore imperative that local, state and federal agencies work together to support sustainable forest management statewide to retain all the benefits these lands provide.

Through Governor Bullock's Forests in Focus Initiative, the state of Montana is employing a variety of approaches to promote sustainable forest management on all lands, with key strategies targeted at helping to increase the pace and scale of restoration on national forests in Montana.

State/Federal Partnership Strategies

- » 2014 Farm Bill Engagement
- » Direct financial investments on USFS lands
- » Master Stewardship Agreement/
Chessman Reservoir
- » Good Neighbor Authority
- » Collaborative Engagement
- » Litigation involvement

"Governor Bullock's support through Montana's Forests in Focus Initiative enabled the Lolo National Forest to implement the Nation's first Farm Bill project. FIF was, and remains, critical to providing additional capacity that enables the Lolo to implement these important projects without delay. "

-Tim Garcia, Lolo National Forest Supervisor

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
COUNCIL. 2015-16

2014 Farm Bill: Priority Landscapes and Authorities

The 2014 Farm Bill provided an opportunity for the Governors of every state with national forest system lands within their borders to recommend priority areas for treatment due to threats from forest insects and disease. Governor Bullock's nomination resulted in the designation of 4.97 million acres and include lands in every national forest in Montana.

Projects in these priority landscapes can be completed using a new categorical exclusion (CE) or a focused Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to expedite project efficiencies and effectiveness. The new authorities require collaborative engagement by interested stakeholders with diverse interests. The state of Montana is working alongside the Northern Region of the forest service to increase restoration goals and ensure successful implementation of projects in the Farm Bill priority landscape area.

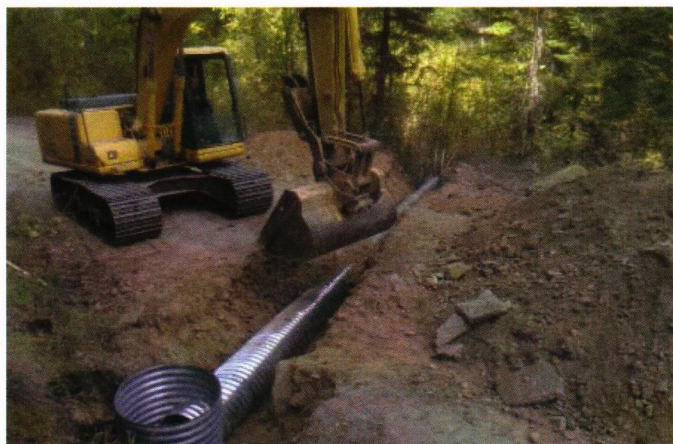


Figure 2: Culvert installation along a haul route for the Firecracker Annie project in Mineral County. The road work was awarded to two local contractors using Forests In Focus grant funds

- » The Governor's interest and support has encouraged the Northern Region to accelerate implementation of Farm Bill projects while strengthening public engagement in the process.
- » Approximately 22 projects using the new authorities are planned or underway in Montana. Several of these projects are receiving direct support from the state of Montana through the Governor's Initiative.
- » The Northern Region has hired a new NEPA Strike Team to focus solely on these projects to help increase the pace of restoration outcomes.

The Farm Bill Insect & Disease provisions provide opportunities for land managers to:

- » **Focus integrated restoration efforts** in priority landscapes;
- » **Increase partnership opportunities** with states and other interested parties;
- » **Strengthen the role of collaboration and citizen engagement** to more effectively and efficiently develop, analyze and implement projects that reduce the risk or extent of, or increase resilience to, insect and disease infestations.

Forests in Focus Investments in USFS Projects

Under authority granted by the Legislature, Governor Bullock has made one million dollars available from the state fire suppression account to engage directly with the Forest Service on projects.

The State of Montana is investing in 15 Forest Service projects across the state, benefiting each National Forest and 11 counties. These projects are bolstering restoration outcomes on over 200,000 acres of forested land, improving recreational opportunities, providing roughly 50 million board feet of timber to Montana's mills and necessary goods and services to support resource dependent communities.

- » All of the 15 projects receiving funding are within or immediately adjacent to the Farm Bill priority landscape designations.
- » Seven of the projects are using Farm Bill Authority; Four of them will use the Insect and Disease Categorical Exclusion (Farm Bill CE).
- » As of January 2016, six of the projects have decisions signed and contracts are being awarded to Montana businesses.

CASE STUDY: Upper Sheep Creek Farm Bill Project

Forest: Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forest

District: White Sulphur Springs Ranger District

County: Meagher

NEPA Tool Used: Farm Bill/Insect & Disease Categorical Exclusion

Timeline from Initiation to Decision: 8 months

Acres Treated: 1,456

FIF Funding: \$75,000

“With Forests In Focus grant money, the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District was able to hire an additional four biological science technician temporary employees. This tripled our capacity to accomplish surveys for Canada lynx habitat and old growth which are necessary to meet our Forest Plan standards. In essence, these additional surveys resulted in a decision that included three times the amount of acres than we would have been able to analyze without Forests In Focus funding.”

-Allison Kolbe, USFS Wildlife Biologist

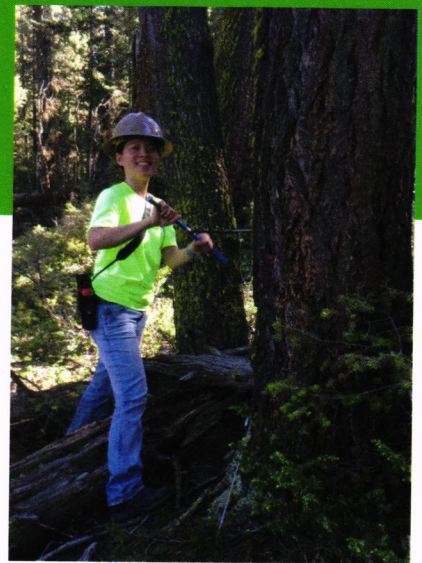


Figure 1: MCC interns learn to age a tree (top) and complete old growth surveys (bottom) in the project area.

Highlights: Located in the Little Belt Mountains along the U.S. Hwy 89 corridor between White Sulphur Springs and Niehart, the Upper Sheep Creek project proposes a range of management activities to maintain or restore the structure, function, composition and connectivity of a forest system that has been adversely affected by insect and disease. The proposed activities promote whitebark pine regeneration, protect older, large trees and thin several previously harvested units to improve growth and resiliency of younger forest stands. Additionally, the project addresses concerns related to dead, dying or overcrowded forest conditions that pose a higher risk for severe wildfire along the U.S. Highway 89 corridor and around a subdivision in the wildland urban interface.

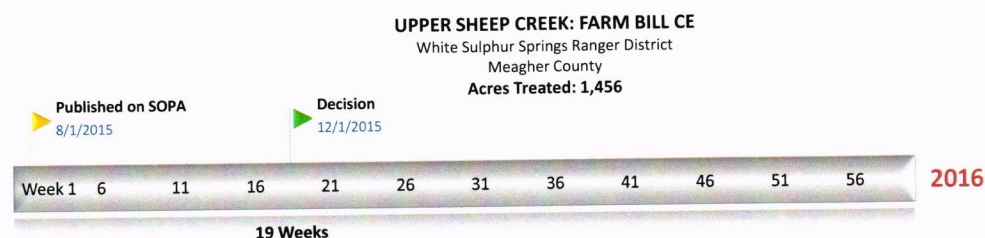
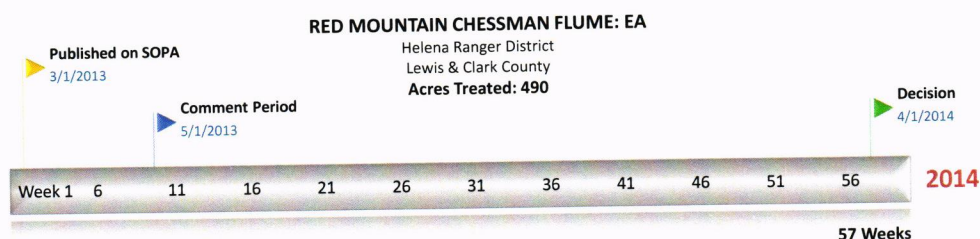
Because additional funding was made available through the Forests in Focus initiative, the Forest Service was able to hire additional seasonal interns from the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC). Working in conjunction with Forest Service wildlife technicians, the interns were trained to do old growth and lynx surveys. Identified old growth and large trees will be retained, as appropriate for the forest type and to the extent trees promote stands that are resilient to insects and disease, to preserve wildlife habitats and add valuable structural and successional diversity of the forest. The additional workforce capacity meant a greater collection of data to help ensure the project would produce the greatest outcomes to the ground and for the surrounding community.

The project was developed through a collaborative process involving multiple interested persons representing diverse interests (e.g., local land/homeowners, private business owners, timber industry professionals, recreation interest groups, local government representatives and State wildlife agency biologists) who assisted Forest Service resource specialists in identifying issues, refining management options and areas and developing the treatment types to meet resource management objectives.

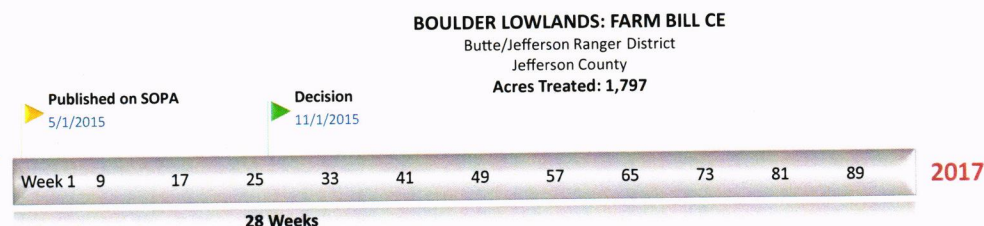
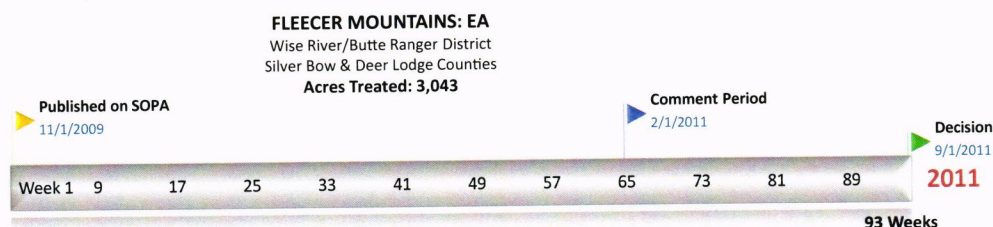
REGION 1: Montana Farm Bill Project Update

Project Timeline Comparisons*

HELENA/LEWIS & CLARK NATIONAL FOREST



BEAVERHEAD-DEERLODGE NATIONAL FOREST

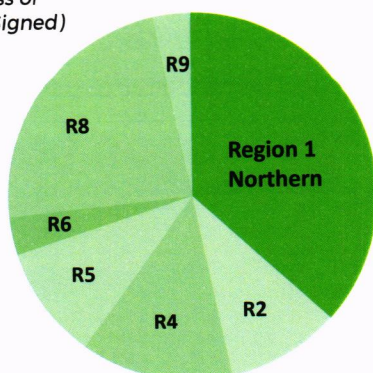


INTEGRATED RESTORATION PROJECTS

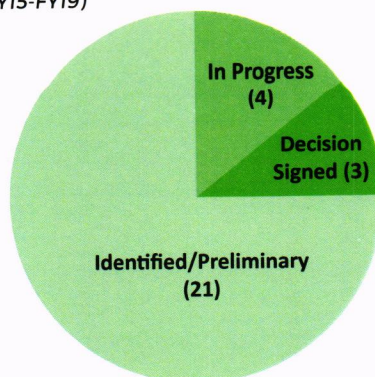
Farm Bill projects can incorporate a suite of restoration outcomes in addition to the insect and disease and hazardous fuel reduction components. Examples of other activities that have been included in the proposed actions for R1 Farm Bill projects include **road maintenance and relocation** to reduce sediment contribution to streams, **road decommissioning** (in addition to temporary road decommissioning), **aquatic organism passage replacement** and **wildlife habitat improvement** (e.g. conifer encroachment in aspen stands).

Farm Bill Project Counts

Forest Service Farm Bill Projects by Region
(In Progress or Decision Signed)



State of Montana Farm Bill Projects
(FY15-FY19)



*Project timelines are based on the time from publishing the project on a forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) to a decision being signed. It does not capture the amount of time spent on project development and public engagement/ collaboration prior to publishing on the SOPA.

Red Mountain Flume Chessman Reservoir Partnership Project

In an effort to share resources and partner with the Forest Service on projects of mutual benefit, the Montana DNRC has entered into a Master Stewardship Agreement with the Forest Service. The pilot project under this agreement is the 490-acre Red Mountain Flume Chessman Reservoir Project in the Tenmile watershed near Helena. This project includes fuels reduction and forest restoration work aimed at protecting Helena's municipal water supply.



The DNRC is administering the contract for harvest and forest work being conducted by Montana businesses. To date, approximately 400 acres of mechanical and hand treatment has been completed and over 2 million board feet of timber has been delivered to R-Y Timber.

This project, when complete, will be the first agreement of its kind in the nation, and will ensure a clean and safe water supply for the residents of Helena. Complimentary fuels reduction work is occurring on private lands adjacent to the Chessman Reservoir.

Forests in Focus Economic Contribution

Investments in the 15 project areas are helping sustain **1,047 jobs** (direct, indirect & induced) with a total of **60.5 million** dollars in labor and proprietor income, and **23.8 million** dollars in state and federal taxes.

A New Partnership Tool: Good Neighbor Authority

The 2014 Farm Bill and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 provide the authority for the Forest Service to enter into sole source contracts and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) Agreements with state agencies to accomplish restoration services when similar and complementary activities occur on and off federal land. GNA has the potential to provide a new, flexible management tool to enable Montana and federal partners to collaborate more closely in carrying out critical forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration activities, as well as fuels reduction projects across boundaries.

- » The State is exploring the best way to utilize the Good Neighbor Authority to increase the pace and scale of restoration in Montana -across ownerships.
- » The State and Northern Region will look to counties and other partners to bring cross-boundary project ideas and increased capacity to help leverage good projects.

Montana Forests in Focus Funds Are:

Supporting collaborative partnerships and citizen engagement

Reducing time to project decision by 1-2 years

Bolstering restoration outcomes and acres treated

Sustaining Montana jobs and youth development

FORESTS IN FOCUS PROJECTS

